

# Karamoja Resilience Support Unit

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## Drought Risk Management in Karamoja: Challenges and Opportunities



### Introduction

In East Africa it is widely recognized that strong drought management is one of the most effective ways of supporting resilience in arid and semi-arid areas. Since the 1980s there has been considerable progress in early warning systems in many countries and an increasing emphasis on livelihoods-based early responses that are supported by governments, working with development partners. These responses have been shown to have very high economic impacts and efficiencies, particularly responses that enable agro-pastoralist and pastoralist communities to protect key livestock assets.

The Karamoja sub-region in northeast Uganda is a semi-arid area with an economy that is based on livestock production. However, Karamoja is the most food-insecure area of Uganda and has very high levels of malnutrition. One reason for this situation is recurrent drought. Drought causes excess livestock mortality and crop failures, and so has direct impacts on household food and income. These issues were examined in a recent review of the functionality of the government's disaster management system and the extent to which agencies have incorporated crisis modifiers or other contingencies in their programs in the Karamoja. This Briefing Paper presents the main findings from the review report.<sup>i</sup> The review considered the roles of the National Emergency Coordination Center (NECOC) and District Disaster Management Committees (DDMCs) in collecting and analyzing early warning information, and in timely response to drought. Similarly, resilience and development programs with substantial funding from bilateral and multilateral donors are being implemented,

either within Karamoja or in conjunction with other regions. As these programs operate in a disaster-prone region, they might include risk modifier components as the first line of response to disasters such as drought.

The review process included community focus groups and interviews with DDMCs in nine districts, staff from international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and UN agencies, Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF 3), NECOC, Regional Pastoral Livelihood Resilience Project (RPLRP), and the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industries and Fisheries (MAAIF) in Kampala and Entebbe. Relevant literature was also reviewed, including documents on drought management and crisis modifiers in Kenya and Ethiopia for the purpose of comparison.

### Main Findings

#### *Drought risk management at community level*

- Indigenous early warning systems and forecasts are capable of predicting droughts,<sup>ii</sup> although external factors are undermining these practices. The capacity of communities to manage drought has also declined dramatically due to multiple stresses and shocks. These include recurring droughts, floods, animal and plant diseases and pests, livestock market restrictions related to attempts to control foot and mouth disease, and COVID-19 control measures. There has also been a recent resurgence of cattle raids.
- The ongoing resilience programs of NGOs include building the capacities of Village Disaster Management Committees. However, it is too early to assess the effectiveness of these activities.

## *District Disaster Management Committees (DDMCs)*

- DDMC members are drawn from line departments and consider the disaster management as an additional burden on top of their main responsibilities. In part, the absence of contingency funds for emergency response exacerbates this situation. Scheduled monthly meetings between DDMCs and District Disaster Planning Committees are often postponed and take place only when disasters occur.
- Recently, five-year District Contingency Plans (CPs) were developed with the support of the World Food Programme. However, there are no guarantees that the new CPs will receive funding when disasters happen; previous CPs have not been funded.
- The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has helped to revive district early warning (EW) systems that were not functional for the last two years due to lack of funds. DDMCs doubt that funds will become available for EW activities when the current FAO project phases out.
- DDMCs rely on NGOs for minor disasters; when major disasters occur, they report to NECOC and wait for responses.

## *Disaster management status of National Emergency Coordination Center (NECOC)*

- NECOC was formulated by a policy document in 2011 and operates under the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). With a staff of 20 at its headquarters, NECOC is responsible for EW, preparedness, and disaster management for all 135 districts in Uganda.
- NECOC was not established by an Act of the Uganda parliament. Therefore it operates without a contingency budget to respond directly to disasters. For disaster response, NECOC relies on funds from the Ministry of Finance. This situation, together with the absence of NECOC staff at district levels, prevents NECOC from allocating contingency funds to DDMCs.
- At present, NECOC's main activity is producing monthly EW and weather forecasts. It also dispatches emergency items as and when funds become available.

## *Linkages between District Disaster Management Committees (DDMCs) and National Emergency Coordination Center (NECOC)*

- Linkages between DDMCs and NECOC are weak. DDMCs understand the limitations of NECOC but also resent being blamed for insufficient frontline responses. In addition, DDMCs resent the need to use non-emergency budgets to transport relief consignments from district centers to the final destinations. NECOC understands the frustration of the DDMCs

but is unable to change the status quo. However, if funds and opportunities arise, NECOC would like to build the capacities of DDMCs. Political will at the highest level is needed to improve the situation.

## *Linkages between District Disaster Management Committees (DDMCs) and Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industries and Fisheries (MAAIF) and Regional Pastoral Livelihood Resilience Project (RPLRP)*

- DDMCs report to MAAIF in cases of livestock and plant disease outbreaks and pest infestation. However, responses are often delayed. Informants gave examples of late response to an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease (one year late) and fall armyworm (two months late, after much of the damage had been done). The phased-out RPLRP trained eight communities on a “pastoral risk early warning and response system” but the project's contingency fund was never used because no national emergency was declared during the project. The forthcoming second phase of RPLRP, commencing in 2022, does not include support to Disaster Risk Management (DRM).

## *Ongoing resilience and development programs in Karamoja: linkages with disaster risk reduction (DRR) and risk modifiers*

There are various large-scale resilience or development programs being implemented in Karamoja, or jointly with neighboring regions.

- Of these initiatives, a six-year safety net program focusses on DRM activities through intensive labor work, grants and unconditional cash transfers. Activities are usually triggered by NECOC's six-month normalized difference vegetation index (NDVI) forecast in the pre-disaster phase.
- Other large-scale development/resilience initiatives in the region focus on market-based agriculture development; governance; logistics; EW, natural resource management, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); maternal and child health; nutrition; and formation of



Village Disaster Management Committees for prioritization of hazards, building community assets, improvement of agriculture/livestock, and other activities. However, only one agency/project included contingency funds to enable disaster response; in this case, the fund was limited and was used for responding to the COVID-19 crisis. Another agency had set aside funds (amount unknown) for anticipated unconditional cash transfers. Most agencies/projects were not familiar with the crisis modifier concept and operate without a crisis modifier or comparable types of flexible funding. The lack of crisis modifiers in most large-scale development/resilience initiatives in Karamoja is a major concern and illustrates that disaster response—even on a limited scale—has been mostly overlooked.

- Karamoja is a disaster-prone region requiring pre- and post-emergency interventions every few years, either across the region or more localized in affected counties and sub-counties. It is unclear why disaster preparedness and response have a low profile in many programs, but there may be a misperception that pre- and post-disaster responses are the sole responsibilities of NECOC and the safety net program. However, NECOC has limited capacity to respond to disasters, and the safety net program reaches only a small proportion of the region's population (33,000 households in both Karamoja and Teso Regions). The program also operates in parts of the region with watershed basins. Its mandate is limited to pre-empting anticipated disasters in watershed locations but with no role in post-disaster responses.
- It is recognized by aid donors and regional bodies such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development that in disaster-prone regions like Karamoja, gains made by resilience or development programs in normal years can be quickly overridden by disasters.

Despite this risk, and the clear potential to use funding mechanisms and interventions to reduce the risk, there was a conspicuous lack of disaster contingency thinking in many large-scale programs.

- In cases where disaster management is considered, programs tend to focus only on one side of the DRM equation. For example, “pre-disaster” activities include preparing communities to assess and manage their assets, prioritization of hazards in operational areas, and providing temporary employment through civil works, afforestation, etc. These interventions are potentially useful for building resilience in the long term, but they will not enable communities to respond to a crisis on their own within the timeframe of these programs, or even beyond.
- Drought Cycle Management (DCM) was developed in Turkana, Kenya—adjacent to Karamoja—in the early 1980s. The concept drew on a realization that development and emergency responses to drought were being handled as very separate issues and were uncoordinated. The DCM model assumed that a successful response to drought required governments, agencies and donors to assimilate the development and emergency responses of their programs. To advance this idea in practical terms, the model used four phases of a typical drought, viz., normal, alert, emergency and recovery. It assigned different activities to each of these phases. DCM is a long-term cornerstone of Kenya's National Drought Management Authority (NDMA). DCM features in the Ethiopian government's national guidelines for livelihoods-based drought response and is recommended by the global Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS).<sup>iv</sup> However, agencies in Karamoja were generally unaware of the DCM concept. This is a critical gap in capacity to manage drought effectively in the region.

### What is a crisis modifier?<sup>iii</sup>

A crisis modifier is a funding mechanism that is designed to support a timely response to crises. It recognizes that early responses to drought tend to be far more effective than late responses. Crisis modifiers have various forms but, critically, are part of long-term development projects in areas that are at risk of emergencies. For example:

- In a development project a certain proportion or amount of funds that were initially assigned for development activities are rapidly re-assigned to emergency response; this shift in use does not require donor approval, and so can be activated quickly by the implementing agency;
- Another type of crisis modifier enables rapid access to humanitarian funds by a development project. It is based on collaboration between the development and humanitarian departments of an aid donor, and access to humanitarian funds by the project according to a pre-agreed ceiling.



- In addition to recommending DCM as a basic tool for drought management, LEGS also provides evidence-based guidance on livestock interventions during crises. In other countries and regions, LEGS is the reference point for international humanitarian donors and UN agencies such as FAO. However, agency staff in Karamoja were not familiar with LEGS. It seems never to have been used in Karamoja to guide effective drought planning and responses.

## Conclusions

- In Karamoja, NECOC and DDMCs were not in a position to respond effectively to disasters. Resources for anticipating and managing disasters were limited.
- There are clear opportunities to learn and adapt drought management approaches that are being used in other countries. Kenya runs a reasonably effective DRM system under NDMA, through which local governments (with a dedicated contingency budget) and communities operate as the first line of response; the national treasury provides additional resources on a timely basis in more severe crises. Kenya also has an effective EW system in which the trigger indicators are linked to specific interventions under each stage of the drought cycle. A “cross-border” learning approach

could be considered in which NDMA experts from Turkana share experiences with actors in Karamoja.

- Contingency funding is critical for effective and timely drought response: *“In Ethiopia, there was widespread use of flexible funding and crisis modifiers in development and resilience projects, supported by various donors (USAID, EU and DFID) in 2015–16. They generally led to timely responses preceding typical humanitarian projects and led to (in one specific case) USAID reprogramming USD\$10 million of Feed the Future and water resources to respond to drought conditions through regular development activities.”*<sup>iii</sup>
- Contingency funds for early drought response should be included in resilience/development programs in Karamoja to safeguard livelihood gains. Clearly, this requires the support of donors and so is a key issue for Karamoja Development Partners Group (KDPG) members to consider.
- The non-familiarity of government and resilience and development program staff in Karamoja with DCM and LEGS can be addressed relatively easily through awareness-raising and training activities. A good understanding of DCM and LEGS is central to the effective use of flexible funding mechanisms such as crisis modifiers.

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## Endnotes and references

- <sup>i</sup> The full report is: Aklilu, Y., Okori, E. and Arasio, R.L. (2021). Drought Risk Management in Karamoja: A Review of Functionality and Capacity. A report for the Karamoja Development Partners Group. Karamoja Resilience Support Unit, Tufts University, Kampala. [https://karamojaresilience.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/TUFTS\\_2143\\_KRSU\\_Drought\\_Capacity\\_V2\\_online.pdf](https://karamojaresilience.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/TUFTS_2143_KRSU_Drought_Capacity_V2_online.pdf).
- <sup>ii</sup> Radeny, M. et al. (2019). Indigenous Knowledge for Seasonal Weather and Climate Forecasting across East Africa. *Climate Change* 56:509–526.
- <sup>iii</sup> Catley, A. and Charters, R. (2015). Early Response to Drought in Pastoralist Areas: Lessons from the USAID Crisis Modifier in East Africa. USAID Resilience Learning Project, Nairobi.
- <sup>iv</sup> [www.livestock-emergency.net](http://www.livestock-emergency.net).